

Rescued boys give woman hope

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Cedar Rapids Carolyn Pospisil cried through most of the night after she learned two kidnapped Missouri boys were found safe Friday in suburban St. Louis.

The tears were ones of joy and hope. And frustration.

That William "Ben" Ownby, 13, missing four days, and Shawn Hornbeck, 15, gone for four years, were found alive gave her hope that someday she'll find her stepdaughter, Erin Pospisil, who disappeared at age 15 from Cedar Rapids on June 3, 2001.

"It definitely gave us hope that long-term stuff can happen and you can get a positive outcome after this long," Pospisil said.

Pospisil, who now lives in Council Bluffs, often reaches out to parents of missing children and has spoken to Hornbeck's mother a couple of times. The Pospisil family organized the non-profit Help Find a Child to keep Erin's story circulating, to hold safety clinics and to educate others about missing kids.

"I don't want anyone to be in the same position that we were in, where we didn't know who to talk to. We didn't have anyone to go to," Pospisil said.

Key in finding both Missouri boys was the immediate attention paid Ben's disappearance. There wasn't as much attention - or immediate attention - when Shawn disappeared in 2002 at age 11. With Ben, there was, Pospisil said.

"The biggest thing was that people were paying attention. It was a teenage boy that helped find these kids," Pospisil said.

It's been 5 1/2 years since friends saw Erin get into a 1990s Chevrolet Cavalier in the 100 block of 12th Street SE. She vanished. Three days later, after the family had exhausted every resource, they went to Cedar Rapids police.

When Erin disappeared six weeks after her 15th birthday, she had been going through "normal 15-year-old, growing pains kinds of things," Pospisil said. Police decided she was a runaway, Pospisil said, making it more difficult to get law enforcement involved.

Most kids will let someone know when they've run away. Law enforcement should trust the parents when they say a child didn't run away, Pospisil said.

"I know my daughter didn't run away," Pospisil said. "We always knew where she was even when she was mad. . . . You just know your kids."

Part of her would like to believe that she's wrong: "That seems better than the alternative."

Cedar Rapids Police Lt. Chuck Mincks said most of the reports taken about missing people are for runaways, juveniles up to the age of 18 who leave home of their own free will.

How police handle missing person reports is decided case by case. If there is reason to believe a person has been abducted - maybe their car is found parked with a door open then the search becomes more urgent.

"If we don't know why a kid is missing, probably the quicker we can act the better," Mincks said.

Iowa City Police Sgt. Troy Kelsay agreed, saying police backtrack to the last place the child was seen and start the search from there.

Noreen Gosch of West Des Moines, whose 12-year-old son, Johnny Gosch, became the face for missing children everywhere after he disappeared while delivering newspapers in 1982, said she, too, was thankful the two boys were found in Missouri. Since Johnny was kidnapped, laws have improved as has the awareness of pedophiles, she said, noting many of the changes came because of her son's high profile disappearance.

She described the Amber Alert system as "a huge step forward" because information can be sent out nationally, including the description of a vehicle, when a child is abducted.

Gosch joins Pospisil in urging people to regularly review Web sites that post photos of missing children.

"You never know when you'll be the one to spot a victim who is too afraid to cry out for help," Gosch said. **Know where your child is**

- Arrange for your child's school to notify you if your child is late, leaves early or doesn't show up at all.
- Take front-on, mugshot-style photos of your children, every six months for children under 5, and at least once a year for older children.
- Let your school or day-care know if your child is at risk of being taken, such as by a family member who doesn't have permission.
- Children should travel to and from school in pairs or groups.
- Especially in rural areas, children should not wait at a bus stop alone.

Source: Cedar Rapids Police Department

What you can do to help

- Regularly check pictures of missing kids posted on bulletin boards.
- Go to Internet sites that post pictures of missing people to check for familiar faces. Sites include Missing Person Information Clearinghouse and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Report information, such as sightings, to 1(800) 843-5678 or 1-(800) THE-LOST.
Source: Carolyn Pospisil, stepmother of Erin Pospisil, missing since June 3, 2001 (For more information, check helpfindachild.com or call Pospisil at (319) 270-1540.)
- **If you have someone missing**
- First, call local law enforcement and work with them.
- Get information out immediately using friends, family, coworkers to help.
Make sure Web sites posting missing person information have a good photo of the missing person to post.
- When the missing person is found, report the return to law enforcement and Web sites that noted the person was missing.